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AUTHOR O'Donnell, Cathy
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ABSTRACT

This analysis of peer editing techniques briefly discusses the following: (1) the advantages of peer group editing, such as the availability of a wider audience and writing models; (2) the potential disadvantages of grouping unskilled or uncommitted students; (3) forming groups; (4) using sentence combining exercises to facilitate trustbuilding; (5) sequencing assignments, beginning with a first-person narrative; (6) sharing papers by reading them aloud; (7) editing responses; and (8) evaluation procedures. (AEA)

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PEER EDITING: A WAY TO IMPROVE WRITING

Cathy O'Donnell

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Cathy O'Donnell
2019 Grand, Schenectady, N.Y.
12309

Peer Editing: A Way to Improve Writing

At one time or another each one of us has probably organized his or her students into groups to do some particular task: prewriting, a class presentation, study questions. The value of group editing has, however, been underestimated. The teaching of editing to peer groups as a means of improving writing is the topic of this talk.

Before explaining the best ways to form groups and help them operate, it is necessary to explain the advantages of peer group editing. First, the talented writer finds the spotlight he or she needs. Sometimes this is the quiet student who otherwise goes unappreciated. Less talented writers hear and read assignments similar to the one they have just worked on, and seeing a good example of the assignment often shows them what they have to do to their drafts. Moreover, teachers have to spend less time in tedious corrections, the kind one student can explain to another. This method allows more time for teacher-student conferences that help a student hone his writing, making it sharper, clearer, more detailed.

Peer group editing also has some potential disadvantages: editing groups composed entirely of slow students seldom work effectively. These students often have neither the skills nor the confidence to do extensive editing. Also, if students are not committed to improving their writing skills, editing groups will get nowhere. However, if students have been sold on the value of clear, memorable prose and if the groups have been carefully engineered, their writing will improve. Therefore the next question is: how are good editing groups formed? What defines a good editing group? First, the members must trust each other. They must also believe that writing is important and that they have the ability to learn writing skills.

And finally, they must be able to diplomatically yet effectively comment on a piece of writing.

Using these three definitions, we set up editing groups. Just as it is necessary to lay careful groundwork in writing an essay or story, so too is it necessary to begin groups carefully. We wait until we know students a bit, say several weeks into the semester, to assemble groups. This gives us the chance to avoid potential personality clashes and to learn where student strengths lie. Depending on the chemistry of the class, we mix students of varying abilities (four or five members per group), and tell them that unless some serious problem arises, they will work in their particular group until the end of the semester. These groups need quiet if they are to function properly. We usually have five or six groups in a class: two groups regularly gather in corners of the hallway, and the other groups choose corners of the classroom. We begin by assigning sentence combining exercises. Such assignments pose little personal threat to members while building a sense of trust among them. According to Malcolm and Hulda Knowles in their book, Introduction to Group Dynamics, members have to feel that they are trusted and that they belong before the group will cohere. We also use sentence combining as a means of making students realize we're serious about these groups. Thus the group that does the best and most efficient job on assignments like sentence combining gets extra credit points.

Once group members begin trusting each other, we have them write a first-person narrative, something they would be willing to read to an audience. We also encourage them by saying that this

kind of narrative finds its source in their own memories, things closest and most accessible to them. They are to render an event from either the near or distant past. We ask them to consider a number of questions while they are writing: What is the main feeling I had about that event? Which details best render that feeling? Which details clutter and thereby distract the audience? These kinds of questions, along with others about mechanics and grammar, are typed up and handed out so that students will know before, during and after they write what is expected. After they have written first drafts and before they go off to editing groups we sometimes present writing models that constitute good execution of the assignment.

When they appear with rough drafts, preferably several days after the writing, we give them these instructions: each member of the group is to read his paper aloud. From personal experience and from talking with students we've discovered that reading aloud almost makes the writing seem like it belongs to someone else, thereby giving the writer a clearer perspective on his own work. Sentence rhythms become prominent. The beginning writer's sentence fragments always jump out. Moreover, reading aloud gives students a better sense of audience. We've discovered that they write better if they have to read to peers. They find themselves reading in public instead of seeing their papers disappear into Teacher's bottomless briefcase. So reading papers aloud is a requirement for all group members.

After each person finishes reading his piece, members respond according to the instruction sheet passed out when the assignment was begun. They have to find, for example, specific instances in which the writer shows an attitude rather than just tells it. These

editors know that the writer cannot merely tell that members of her family were elated; she has to show what they did. Editors can begin by saying what they think the main attitude or main point of the writing is. They can say what sort of voice is coming through. We remind them that they are trying to respond to the writing, not to the writer's apologies about it nor to topics mentioned in the piece. And the writer is advised to stay quiet while his paper is being reviewed.

To encourage proper following of this procedure we require a written report of group commentary. Each member has to write a short account of what got said about his paper, and in the beginning, peer commentary is strictly limited to positive comments, positive suggestions. Young writers, just like older ones, put their egos on the line when they write and thus they need sincere encouragement. The author is told to simply take in the editors' comments, neither apologizing for his paper nor interrupting an editor while she is speaking. Since the paper is his and his exclusively, the writer can later use or discard editors' remarks as he sees fit. The point is that the author needs to listen so that he can understand just how he is reaching his audience.

To encourage editors to take their jobs seriously, we attach extra credit to editing assignments. We give a participation grade partially based on observation of their performance in groups. Sometimes we have them work in pairs, preferably with someone from the large group. After reading the other person's paper, the editor marks a list of the elements the assignment should contain. This list is then turned in with the draft and if we agree with the editor's assessment, the editor gets some extra credit.

While students are reading papers in groups, we move from group to group, observing, listening, to what is going on, asking questions. This is also a good time to see individuals for quick conferences on the particular assignment. These conferences usually take up organizational matters such as paragraph development, but may concern something as minor as proper punctuation. The advantage of the list is that it is either the same or similar to the list of questions each writer had to ask herself in writing the paper. In the case of the narrative, the editor has to ask: what main feeling is the writer trying to convey? What details best convey this feeling? Which details detract from that main impression? Moreover, the writer knows what, according to his editor and me, he has done well and what he needs to reshape.

For the teacher, the practical advantage of peer editing is that you get "cleaner"papers. The run-ons that have heretofore seemed permanent fixtures suddenly disappear. Paragraphs begin flowing more logically. These changes come about because group members, in their growing trust, begin to share what they have learned about writing. We know students are beginning to trust one another when during in-class writing, they spontaneously consult group members in efforts to "get it straight." We've also found that in acting as editors, students gradually become more confident of their own writing. In particular, the young writer gradually becomes aware that he is not merely trying to satisfy Teacher, but that he is attempting to communicate with an audience, an audience of peers who in many cases, matters more than Teacher.